

LET the WAGONS ROLL!

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Joe Rettinger, post office New Mexico, came to see us in July. Mr. Rettinger is a circus buff. He is, moreover, one of the dogged, indefatigable breed. He wants to know everything about Fred Buchanan, the wintering farm at Granger, Iowa, and the hillock where the great jungle bulls lie buried—Gobbler's Knob.

In May Joe Rettinger had written a letter, the kind that both appalls and delights the historical researcher. *How long*, he wanted to know, *was the circus interurban siding? Where was the horse barn, the outside training rings? The parade wagons, how were they displayed on the storage lot? Is there still a path to Gobbler's Knob?*

We didn't know. We began to dig for information feeling, oddly perhaps, that open fields and corn rows seemed an alien home for the calliope and the tiger. Surprisingly, too, very little compiled reference material was to be found. Our store was one thin folder, a few magazine articles, an eight-page, mimeographed history brought out by Jacob A. Wagner in 1941.

We read. We rediscovered the nimble Runplings of McGregor who practiced tumbling in their father's back yard and changed their name to Ringling because the latter had a gay, jingling sound. Did local mothers scold about pins wasted in paying admission to that first hay loft performance? Or, afterwards, boast a little because Horace and Cynthia had seen the beginnings of *The Greatest Show on Earth*?

We felt almost at home with the Ortons. Once, not so long ago, there was an Ortonville two miles east of Adel, Iowa, named for Hiram Orton who was progenitor of both circus and family. Mrs. Fred Poush of Ottumwa, Nellie of the circus Ortons, had told us about her old home three years ago when she came to the Department of History to learn how long the family had been in America.

On her second trip to see us, she brought a portfolio of pictures along with a *Memorandum and Agreement*, signed in the town of Fairfield, June 1st, 1858, by advance agent H. P. Brown and E. S. Sage, *Inn-Keeper*, for the Orton & Olden Southern Circus Company. We have a copy in our files. It reads: *E. S. Gage agrees and contracts to furnish said company on its arrival (on or about the 10th of June) with lodging (two to sleep in one double bed) and good Board . . . Also close stabling, dry materials for bedding and as much Hay & Oats as the Chief Groom may see fit to feed (but not waste) for 30 horses . . . more or less at the rate of 35 cents a day. . . .*

The Poush photographs were a panorama of Ortons, ranging from modern glossies of Orton wives still riding for other circuses to one of Mother Orton, apron trimly about her waist, looking as though she might have stepped from a kitchen redolent of apple butter and pickling spices. Mother Orton, however, was standing beside an elephant, one of the great lumbering beasts she loved. "Mother Walker performed with the elephants," Jacob Walker wrote in 1941, "and when she grabbed the hook and stood before them 'the show was on'."

Perhaps it is the aura of mystery surrounding the later life of Fred Buchanan that adds zest to the sleuthing of circus fans at the Granger, Iowa, site. Buchanan began his career at old Ingersoll Park, Des Moines, an amusement center operated by the Des Moines Street Railway Company. Needing a drawing card, the young manager purchased an elephant, a one-eyed, cantankerous tusker, fascinating to children. It was the first step on the long road that led to the circus.

With the assistance of John Ringling, Buchanan began to acquire the trappings of the business—second hand cages, parade glitter, even the Two Hemispheres Band Wagon. The circus began as a *mudder*. People throughout central Iowa flocked to the Granger farm to watch sleek, powerful horses drill in teams of six, eight, ten for the demanding work ahead of them. When the Yankee Robinson Circus moved to rails it became the third largest in the United States and Iowa was headquarters.

Joe Rettinger came to see us in July bringing a welcome sheaf of circus information. He had been on a pilgrimage to Granger. The railway siding was gone. The old farmhouse, heart of the circus empire, had burned and been replaced. Gone were the great barns, the paint shop, the parade wagons. The Two Hemisphere juggernaut, rescued by Iowa circus fans, once again holds court in gilded splendor at a circus museum in Sarasota, Florida.) Now there remains at the farm only the shed with the concrete pit where Miss Iowa, the bumptious hippo, made her home. And, yes, there is the low hill where the great bulls sleep, far and away from their jungle home.

What of Fred Buchanan? What of the master of farm and circus? There is now no answer. First came success and then the depression. In mid-1931 the Robbins Bros. show closed abruptly. To compound bitterness, circus workmen were assailed by a mob that killed one crew member and injured others. Suddenly Buchanan dropped from sight. Rumor had him sponsoring a small show here or there but the golden touch was gone. He was to become a legend, probably in his own lifetime, a little shadowy, a little exotic, a little broader than life.

Visit Granger, if you can, this autumn. Go on a day when the sun is gray-gold and when a crow is bound to be riding the wind currents over house and hill. If there is a stir among the dried mullein stalks, listen! Then take a book from the car seat beside you. Its name will be *Gus the Great!* It was written by young Tom Duncan, an Iowan.

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